Name of Scholar: Stuti Mamen

Supervisor: Dr. Saurav Dasthakur

Title: Ugly Matters: Analysing the Representation of Filth and the Grotesque in Select Indian Literary Texts (1960 - 2013)

Registration No. VB-684 of 2006-07

Date of Registration: 08.09.2014

Synopsis

Do certain contemporary Indian writers have a specific way of viewing reality that is different from that of their preceding generation? As a result of the long history of colonization the average Indian seems to have inherited the aesthetic sensibility of the Victorian. Thus, as opposed to the more earthy narratives of rural India, emerged the polished, elegant fiction composed by individuals brought up with or influenced by an English education. Furthermore, the classical Indian tradition in art and literature prioritises the aesthetic of beauty and has no room for ugliness. The writings of Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan indeed have a tone and flavour that is very different from many of the later works in the Indian English literary scene. Texts like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* (1997), Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007) and Uday Prakash's *Walls of Delhi* (2012) extensively use grotesque visuals and language as tools of resistance to speak up against authoritative, hegemonic forces. I aim to use Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque and refer to number of other texts that critically explore the aesthetics of ugliness, as a framework within which we can analyze the politics of representation of 'filth' and 'grotesque' in select works of Indian English literature and Indian literature translated in English from 1960 until now.

By 'filth' I mean both literal/actual filth in the form of explicit portrayal of unappealing sights and smells and metaphorical filth. Sex for instance is almost always presented as 'dirty' garnished with a sense of bitter humour and sometimes lamentation. There is also a conscious attempt at showcasing malformed physical attributes in characters or featuring mutant-like figures. Umberto Eco in *On Ugliness* states how ugliness is associated with man's animality and limitation. The child with an ever enlarging head in Uday Prakash's story '*Mangosil*' or the protagonist of Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* have deformities that act as means of resistance hurled at the centre from the margin.

The carnivalesque is a mode which dislodges the dominant conventions in society and Bakhtin in his *Rabelais and his World* explains how the grotesque body (as opposed to the beautiful and complete classical body) and the lower bodily functions (as opposed to actions considered presentable and decent by society) act as tools by means of which the forces from the periphery disrupts that of the centre. Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* abounds in scatology. The scene in the woman's washroom where Rahel describes the women of her family urinating is nothing but liberating. The multi-lingual, foul-mouthed protagonist, Janwar, of Indra Sinha's

Animal's People walks on his four limbs and is obsessed with thoughts about copulation. The carnivalesque is however a Western theory and the 'ugly' has always in some way or the other been a concept featuring in Western ideology. Classical Indian tradition on the other hand has always highlighted beauty. The beauty of demon king Ravana is described in details in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Kali in Hindu mythology is indeed fearsome but does not inspire the sort of apathy which 'ugliness' does, sex is glorified and made divine in the *Kamasutra*, and so on. This Indian obsession with beauty seems to be very much still alive, as seen in mainstream Indian culture. This might make one ask if a few Indian writers starting from the twentieth century are breaking away from a mould and consciously following an existing or creating a new tradition. This 'existing tradition' can mean influences from Western literature or there might be an existing tradition of the carnivalesque in Bhasa literature as well. This is something that needs to be looked into. Perhaps the confrontation with a certain kind of social situation automatically leads to the creation of a literature that prioritises a specific kind of visual language. And this type of literature has always been off-beat, reactionary, avantgarde in nature.

My thesis will tentatively comprise of four chapters. In my first chapter I will look into the representation of ugliness in the Indian literary and cultural scene. India does not have a long running tradition of painting as a fine art unlike the West where the category of the grotesque in painting has been greatly discussed and pondered on. In the succeeding chapters I will be looking into Indian poetry, short stories and novels, and graphic novels and there will be a separate chapter for each genre. The first impression I had on reading poetry written by Indian poets in English was that their verses are radically gritty with an ability to unsettle its readers. The poetry of Keki. N.Daruwalla, Arun Kolatkar, A.K Ramanujan and others are inhabited by blind beggars, dilapidated buildings, abandoned temples, rivers with scum, sex without love, city-grime, ominous characters, and so on. I ended up finding similar elements in certain contemporary Indian prose in their description of New India. Delhi in *Walls of Delhi* by Uday Prakash resembles a hell on earth and the mysterious voice haunting the protagonist, which says 'dirty money', echoes throughout the story. The second chapter will thus be on poetry while the third chapter will explore short stories and novels. Literature of this kind seems to always have been less in number or circulation among the masses in spite of achieving something like literary accolade. The irony therefore lies in the fact that these works which make use of grotesque visuals and language as tools of resistance against the oppressive hegemonic forces, and which thereby stand in favour of the masses, are hardly what appeals to the masses. Interestingly the relatively new genre of the Indian 'graphic novel' has already become a classic representative of subaltern texts. Attempts at marketing it, no matter how immense the effort, will not perhaps ever make it 'popular' literature. Again, though it enjoys a niche, elite readership, attempts have been made to make it more accessible. Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* (1994) considered one of the first graphic novels of India served as a pamphlet on the Narmada Bachao Andolan. Vss Shastry's *Bhimayana* (2011) features authentic Gond art, that is, instead of mimetically recreating tribal art, actual Gond artists were responsible for the artwork in the book. These examples illustrate the revisionary quality of the genre and establish Indian graphic novels as a potent site of resistance. The fourth chapter will thus be on Indian graphic novels with special emphasis on the difference between Indian comic books that make use of mainstream Western comic book aesthetics and are targeted at a wider audience and visual narratives that follow an indie aesthetics and are coincidentally about the underbelly.

As a comment on the amount and nature of work that has been done in this field, it is to be noted that it is not extensive. A lot of research has been however carried out in the field of grotesque and scatology in English and European literature and a book like Peter Smith's *Between Two Stools: Scatology and its Representation in English Literature, Chaucer to Swift* will prove to be very insightful in understanding important aspects in my own thesis. Smith talks about two schools in the literature of scatology – a merry, celebratory one like that in Chaucer and a scathing, satirical one like that in Swift. In my opinion contemporary Indian writers take recourse mainly to the latter mode. Interestingly their tone while presenting the grotesque or the unappealing is much stringent compared to Salman Rushdie, for , in Rushdie there is still the element of playfulness and regeneration. As a whole we can refer to Bakhtin's comment that the regenerative and potent element of the medieval carnival is lost today. The Indian texts with carnivalesque elements abound mostly in nihilism. The postmodernist element in some of the selected texts further complicates the matter, for postmodernism involves celebration and a sense of 'blankness' while the same texts seem to have a motive or agenda behind them, which brings us back to the issue of the use of Swift-like satire.

Instead of focusing exclusively on a single text, I aim to critically observe a trend/tendency in Indian literature English in general. For this purpose the exclusion of a literary genre would be limiting. Thus my thesis aims to throw light on the particular place and character of 'ugliness' in select Indian literary works, the reception of this brand of aesthetics, and conclude whether these isolated works lead us towards a larger thesis of resistance in the Indian context.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources:

Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger*. Noida: HarperCollins, 2009. Print.

---. *Last Man in Tower*. Noida: HarperCollins, 2012. Print.

Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable*. New Delhi: Penguin India, 2001. Print.

Appupen. *Moonward*. Chennai: Blaft Publications, 2009. Print.

Banerjee, Sarnath. *The Harappa Files*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2011. Print.

---, Sarnath. *Corridor*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2004. Print.

---. *The Barn Owl's Wonderous Capers* . New Delhi: Penguin India, 2007. Print.

Chatterjee, Upamanyu. *English, August: An Indian Story*. New Delhi: Penguin India, 2002. Print.

Ghosh, Amitav. *Calcutta Chromosome.* New Delhi: Penguin India, 2009. Print.

Krishna Mehrotra, Arvind, ed. *Twelve Modern Indian Poets.* New Delhi: Oxford University press, 2009. Print.

Patil, Amruta. *Kari*. Noida: HarperCollins, 2008. Print.

Prakash, Uday. *Peeli Chatri Waali Ladki.* New Delhi: Vaani Prakashan, 2011. Print.

Prakash, Uday. *The Walls of Delhi.* Gurgaon: Hachette India, 2013. Print.

Rao, Raja. *Kanthapura.* New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 2011. Print.

Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things. New* Delhi: Penguin India, 2002. Print.

Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children.* London: Vintage Books, 2013. Print.

Parthasarathy, R, ed. *The Twentieth Century Indian Poets.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.

Satwik, Ambarish, et.al. *PAO: The Anthology of Comics 1*. New Delhi: Penguin India, 2012.

Sinha, Indra. *Animal's People.* Simon & Schuster UK Ltd : London, 2007. Print.

Tharoor, Sashi. *The Great Indian Novel.* Penguin India: New Delhi, 1989. Print.

Thayil, Jeet. *Narcopolis*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2012. Print.

Secondary Sources

Adorno, Theodor. W. *Aesthetic Theory* .New York: Continuum, 2004. Print.

Bakhtin, M.M. *Rabelais and his World.* Trans. Helene Iswosky. Indianna University press. Print.

---. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics.* Trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 1999. Print.

Banerjee Sumanta. *The Parlour and the Streets Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta.* Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1998. Print.

Baudelaire, C. "*Of the Essence of Laughter*". Trans.P.E.Charvet. London: Penguin Books, 2006. Print.

Birdwood, George C.M. *The Industrial Arts of India*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1884. Print.

Chakraborty, Dipesh. "Of Garbage, Modernity, and the Citizen's Gaze", in *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002: 65-79. Print.

Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger; An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge & Paul, 2002. Print.

Eco, Umberto. *On Beauty*. London: Random House , 2004. Print.

---. *On Ugliness*. London: Random House, 2007. Print.

Dayal, Samir. "*Talking Dirty: Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children." College English* 54.4 (1992): n.p. *Jstor*. Web. 5 Dec 2014.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth.* New York: Grove Press, 1963. Print.

Lessing, Ephraaim Gottard. 'Laocoon'. *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetic.* J.M.Bernstein. Ed. Cambridge UP, 2003. Print

Mitter, Partha. Much Maligned Monsters: History of European Reactions to Indian Art. Oxford University Press, 2013. Print.

Pop, Andrei and Mechtild Wildrich. *Ugliness: The Non-beautiful in Art and Theory.* London: I.B. Tauris & Co.Ltd, 2014. Print.

Ramanuja, A.K . "Is there an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay". 2 August 2014. Web. <http://cis.sagepub.com>.

Sinha, Suhashini and C.Panda, eds. *Kalighat Paintings.* Ahmedabad : MapinPublishing Pvt. Ltd, 2011. Print.

Smith, Peter. *Between Two Stools: Scatology and its Representation in English Literature, Chaucer to Swift.* Manchester University Press, 2013. Print.

Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Society*. Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 2013. Print.